

First Square Mile for Pine Mountain

David Burns is the first donor of a square mile of land to help preserve old-growth forest and habitat on Pine Mountain in eastern Kentucky.

Burns gave to Kentucky Natural Lands Trust from 1997 to 2007 to purchase a square mile – 640 acres – for the Pine Mountain Legacy Project. KNLT is drawing attention to the First Square Mile to inspire others to give a mile, or a half-, or a fourth-.

Burns, 79, of Washington, D.C., says, "To me, it's obvious. Kentucky's mountains are beautiful and full of life. If we want mountains for future generations – and our mountains are being blasted away right now – then we must buy the land and protect it. I am not rich, far from it. But I asked myself, is there a goal I might achieve -- even if I'm able to give only a tiny bit at a time? So I pledged to do it. It was a stretch, and it took ten years, but it happened. This is the most significant thing I have ever done.'

David's love of Kentucky's mountains developed as a child in Pineville. His ancestors are noted in Families and History [Bell County Historical Society] as early as 1808. His father, Judge Burns, worked for the Railway Express (Dave calls it "the UPS of its time and place.") The L&N depot was daily entertainment.

Dave's mother, Louise, worked for the Modern Bakery, wrapping cakes (the beginning wage -- ten cents an hour! -- was common in 1940). Sweet cakes were essential for miner's lunch pails.

Dave's uncle, thanks to intelligence and 'seniority,' eventually rose to superintendent of International Harvester coal operations at Benham.

Another relative, Annie Walker Burns of Wallins Creek, wife of his Dad's cousin, initiated the Mountain Laurel Festival to honor Dr. Thomas Walker. The festival was first held in 1931 at Clear Creek and is now Kentucky's longest-running festival.

At 15, Burns made his way to Washington, D.C. "I was," he says, "an out-of-control adolescent with no adult supervision. Political patronage saved my life! Alben Barkley, majority leader of the U.S. Senate, gave me a job, and I attended Page School in the basement of The Capitol." Dave later had a second job as copy boy for The Washington Evening Star.

He served 1946-49 in the U.S. Air Force. He never graduated from the first half of tenth grade. He was rejected by the U. of Kentucky (and many other colleges), but was admitted to Princeton. "I wrote long letters to everybody I had ever heard of; I promised the Dean of Admissions 'I won't let you down.'" He graduated with honors and won a Fulbright for graduate study in France and Austria.

He joined the Foreign Service in 1955, serving at U.S. missions in Damascus, Beirut, Isfahan, Rhodesia, Tunis, Bamako, and Algiers, and studied Arabic for two years in Tangier.

He was Project Director (1978-1990) of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, coordinating scientists around the world to produce scientific studies of causes and effects of greenhouse climate change.

Burns is also a musician and writer. He led the Hot Mustard Quintet (1970-2005), which performed hundreds of gigs in the Washington area (and in Jakarta, Sumatra and Bali), and produced seven CDs. He is a singer and pianist, and also plays trombone, string bass, and tuba. His love of music started as a child in Pineville where, at age 2, he would sing atop marble soda-fountain counters at Rexall and Flocoe drugstores, earning a penny per song.

"I love music. But, really, my obsession is books!" As a child, he set a goal to read every book in the Pineville Public Library. "Well, I might have gotten close -- we didn't have that many books in 1934!" In fifth grade, he read The World Book Encyclopedia, A-to-Z.

The appetite for words led to writing. Dave's articles and op-eds have been published widely, including The New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, and The Washington Post. His book, Gateway: Dr. Thomas Walker and the Opening of Kentucky, is a richly-illustrated account of the first colonial explorer of Virginia's unknown 'wilderness' -- America's first Western frontier.

Burns and his brother donated \$10,000 to create a Historical Site to honor their mother. The site is where Walker first saw and named the Cumberland River. A platform provides a dramatic vista through Pine Mountain Water Gap (known locally as "The Narrows.")

Burns says "We inherit the land and its resources from those who precede us. We have an obligation to be good custodians, manage the resources intelligently and sustainably, and convey this legacy to our children."

Anyone with the desire to join Burns in protecting a square mile, half a square mile, or any amount of natural areas on Pine Mountain, can contact KNLT at 1-877-367-5658 or email us at info@knlt.org.

The Pine Mountain Square Mile Award



*The Kentucky Natural Lands Trust
Hereby proclaims with gratitude and appreciation its recognition of
the pledge and commitment of
David M. Burns
To fund the purchase and acquisition of
One Square Mile
Of outstanding forested land on Pine Mountain
to be conserved in perpetuity for the benefit of all.
This 16th day of September 2005*



Kentucky Natural Lands Trust